

# Hervey Bay: Beyond the Bay Connect Hook-Up

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# Hervey Bay: Beyond the Bay Connect Hook-Up<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In regional Australia there is a growing interest and investment in ICTs and this is beginning to be formalised in a desire to integrate information communications technology opportunities with other forms of community development. This preparatory paper explores the opportunity for greater social integration based on the formation of community-based information technology driven organisations.

It is suggested that whether disseminating information, collaborating with other communities, assisting the development of new industries, or simply by sharing the lessons learned along the way, community-based IT can assist and support a community's economic and social development. Further, the paper supports the view that, where understanding and developing new forms of information technology through community informatics is accepted as an integral part of such development, communities will not just 'improve the old' but will more radically restructure themselves towards a knowledge-based future.

The Case Study that underpins these observations is that of the development of Bay Connect, a community based Internet development and training project based in Hervey Bay, Queensland. Funding from an Australian Commonwealth Government scheme 'Networking the Nation' set it up in 1998. Bay Connect is now expanding into adjacent

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<sup>1</sup> The Bay Connect case study has been presented for publication in *Using Community Informatics to Transform Regions* (2003), chapter titled "HERVEY BAY IN TRANSITION: the role of community based Information Technology in overcoming the great Digital Divide". This follows the co-authors Laretta Wright, Dr Malcolm Cooper and Mr Wayne Pease's presentation of the same at the 2002 IRiTA Conference.

communities like Maryborough and surrounding Shires, and by establishing significant partnerships to create and nurture an IT skills base within the region.

## **HERVEY BAY, QUEENSLAND**

Hervey Bay is located in the Wide Bay Burnett region of Queensland and is, on nearly every indicator, an economically and socially disadvantaged region (Queensland Planning Information and Forecasting Unit, 2001).

The region's median weekly income is \$293.18 well below the Queensland state average of \$398.30 according to the AEC Group's latest statistics (details available from <<http://www.aecgroup ltd.com>>) and the Queensland Government Families Minister Judy Spence, has been reported as saying that the City is the oldest electorate in Queensland (Paussa, 2003, p.1), with 20.7% of its population over 65 compared to the Queensland average of 12.4%. Couple these factors with a continued strong population growth, where Hervey Bay is ranked in the top 35 cities within Australia with one of the fastest growth rates<sup>2</sup> in the country, and a paradox is evident.

Strangely enough, this very high growth rate has resulted in the Wide Bay Region having the second highest welfare recipient rate in Australia, with a ratio of Department of Social Security (welfare) payments to personal disposable income of 27.9% (Bray & Mudd, 1998). Part of this is because unemployment levels are high in the region – being around 16% in Hervey Bay itself. The latter situation is particularly difficult for Indigenous peoples, with only 39% in Hervey Bay being employed compared with a State employment level for Indigenous people of 59% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998), and youth, whose unemployment is around 23% across the region. As a result, income levels in the region are low compared to state and national benchmarks.

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<sup>2</sup> Business advisory KPMG (*The Fraser Coast Chronicle* 27/3/03, p. 1).

As a consequence of *recent* in-migration patterns, the school-aged proportion of the population of the region is actually slightly higher than the national average (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2001) and new groups of professionals are now entering the population. The historic take-up of IT access opportunities has been limited by socio-economic factors in the Wide Bay Burnett region and this partly explains the low rate of take-up of Internet communication opportunities. There is opportunity for change if community capacity building in the IT area can assist and support a community's economic and social development. It is these socio-economic growth opportunities inherent in IT that are at issue.

## **BAY CONNECT – A COMMUNITY SOLUTION**

The City of Hervey Bay, a regional community in south east Queensland, has become increasingly aware of these rapid advances in information and telecommunications technology and of the ways in which personal computers and the Internet have begun to contribute to social and economic change in Australia. Bay Connect was set up in an attempt to solve their community challenges, by establishing a public Internet access project to counter the existence of an 'information poor' section within its community (Langtry, 1998) and its surrounds.

In 1994 Hervey Bay City Council (HBCC) hosted a Community Development Workshop to look at the socio-economic position of the people of Hervey Bay. From this workshop, the Council produced a needs analysis in which they identified inadequate access to information and information networks as contributing to social fragmentation and isolation in the Hervey Bay community. In 1995, the Council received funding under the Social Infrastructure Program from the Department of Families, Youth & Community Care to set up an interim steering committee to discuss this issue, prioritise needs and formally set up a structure to deal with those needs.

The committee became known as Community Solutions Hervey Bay Association Inc., and one of its first actions was to seek support for a local online database or Intranet to address the lack of access to relevant and up-to-date information for the residents of Hervey Bay. In April 1998, Community Solutions received a grant of \$715,000 over four years from Networking the Nation, and the Bay Connect project was realised. This funding accounted for only 54% of the amount sought however, and required supplementation by the HBCC (which supported the establishment and maintenance of the Bay Connect website) and Community Solutions, which supported the telecommunications costs of the public Internet access sites in the first year, and continues to subsidise usage.

Networking the Nation was conceived during a period of rural disenchantment and economic decline; with the considerable political hope that new forms of communication technology would help to minimize some of the disadvantages experienced by Australians living in rural and remote areas (Molnar, 1998), and be seen to do so. In the initial stage of this project, Bay Connect, was set up like a Freenet with free public access to maximise 'pensioner' use; however a user-pays system was introduced on 21 February 2000. Up until that point, the project had provided free training, plus free electronic mail (e-mail) and Internet access to holders of Health Care Cards and Pension Concession Cards who represent approximately 40% of the community.

## **BAY CONNECT IN PRACTICE**

Despite the demise of other Networking the Nation projects, Bay Connect has been able to establish partnerships for support and sponsorship, and thrive. In 2003 seven Internet access sites have been set up at geographically significant points throughout the City (including educational institutions, government agencies and the library), and at Howard and Burrum Heads. To actually foster the concept of public interest concern Bay Connect management supported the Maryborough City Council and the Tiaro Shire with their successful funding applications in recent rounds. The Maryborough project involves a joint venture with the Wide Bay Resource Centre of Queensland Education that will provide ongoing training to Bay Connect clients after the initial funding has been expended.

In the last round of Networking the Nation (NtN) funding - March 2002 - the Gympie and Bundaberg Councils also sought Bay Connect's guidance with their respective applications. The Maryborough, Tiaro, Gympie and Bundaberg areas have received funding to set up Internet access programs modelled after the Bay Connect operation with the goal to provide public telecommunication access in a range of regional locations. This mentorship is an indication of the success of the Bay Connect model (McKeehan, B., personal communication, February 28, 2002). Bay Connect itself also applied for and received funding in March 2002 in the NtN final funding round to set up an adaptive training room. In keeping with Hervey Bay City Council's theme of *Access*, the Bay Connect training programs will continue to support a range of clientele with a variety of needs. With over 1100 people having passed through Bay Connect's training programs since their inception in 1999 it remains flexible, responding to varying conditions and priorities in the Hervey Bay community. The recent addition of a fourth on-going training course is the result of their ability to respond to community demand.

Bay Connect supports their community in their use of IT and the Internet, and does so only with the co-operation of a range of partners. It expects to divest themselves of the access site responsibility (to each access site host) by the end of June 2003, which will decrease the technical support requirement. The equipment, which requires replacement shortly, is likely to be replaced by the site hosts via the Gambling Benefit Fund, or a similar source of community funding. The Manager of Bay Connect reports that it is funded to the end of June 2004 and it is currently working on securing further joint ventures to source funding, equipment and software (McKeehan, B., personal communication, January 22, 2003).

In order to test the client effectiveness of the Bay Connect model, a survey was undertaken in 2000-2001 by one of the authors (Wright, 2001) that sought, inter alia, to understand Bay Connect clients and their relationship with the Internet medium. The results indicated that while there were operational issues with the enterprise, the new Internet users attracted by

the Bay Connect project had experienced a change in their media use patterns. Exposure to the Internet affected the way they sought information and the ways in which they communicated. The study showed that Bay Connect clients were a) purchasing computers, and b) seeking supplementary and alternative Internet access to that of Bay Connect.

A majority of surveyed individuals (over 90%) indicated that they would use the Internet if it were available to them. This shows that Bay Connect has enhanced the awareness and utilization of this form of communication within its membership. This is not a phenomenon restricted to Hervey Bay: the Internet is changing millions of people's lives by altering the way in which they obtain information. With its "mutability" the Internet is also changing rapidly – daily in fact – introducing users to many new functions, faster speeds, more websites and information (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996). It is also quickly becoming a 'place' where mediated communication forms occur as O'Regan (2000) posited, and this would suggest that the potential for use of the Internet as a community integration tool could exceed the variety provided by most other media (Wright, 2001).

## **FURTHER DISCUSSION**

Australia Bureau of Statistics data shows that the overall level of Australian digital inclusion is increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Evidence of the rise is the increase in the share of households with Internet access, which suggests that the digital divide may be starting to narrow, although this appears to be by no means uniform as evidenced by the following:

- As age increases, the likelihood that an adult is either a computer user or an Internet user decreases;
- Older adults are more likely to use a computer or access the Internet at home, younger adults at sites other than home or work and the remaining adults either at home or work;
- Employed adults are more likely to have used a computer or access the Internet than adults who are not employed;

- As income increases, the likelihood that an adult is either a computer user or an Internet user increases;
- Adults in metropolitan areas are more likely to have used a computer or to have accessed the Internet than adults in other areas.

These trends highlight the importance of public Internet access programs for the unemployed and older person living in a regional community in Australia like Hervey Bay. With the world's economy now driven by information technology, the persistence of a divide of have and have-not Internet users could have serious social consequences in the not-to-distant future. However, such technologies need to service Australian communities rather than simply to service commercial interests. The issue of equity of access must be addressed. While the Internet already connects 100 million computers, this figure represents less than 2% of the world's population (Amor, 2000), and it has become increasingly obvious that IT is designed for those who pay for its development: typically large commercial companies in developed countries. While understandable, this means that if you are too poor to afford a telephone connection, you may become excluded from certain services like the Internet (Thomas, 1995). To participate in the Internet one needs access to computers, modems and networks – not everyone has a telephone, some communicate an unwillingness to invest capital in the purchase of a computer, and many express a fear of technology. To complicate the issue of equitable Web access, not everyone takes advantage of the full potential of media literacy. The challenge then for Australian communities is to establish mechanisms like the Bay Connect project to increase access and awareness and provide local training in the use of such technologies.

It is clear that Internet-mediated communication is an increasingly important phenomenon in Australian society. It is unlike any media formerly used for either interpersonal or mass communication. The very form and function of the Internet provides a channel that facilitates a hybrid of traditional media to be used in very non-traditional ways. Most significantly, Internet access allows for many types of participation in the communication process. While the long-term impact of the Bay Connect Public Internet Access Program



on its community is still being assessed, Bay Connect must continue to attract new customers in order to maintain a viable business front after the Networking the Nation grant is exhausted. It is important for Bay Connect at this juncture to identify further strategies for website development, training programs and Internet Access Sites, as well as to evaluate its progress. These strategies would then be integrated with the organization's goal "to enhance the awareness and utilization of the Internet and on-line services by the community of Hervey Bay, particularly those residents who are economically and/or socially disadvantaged" in order to address its founding objective (Wright, 2001).

Inadequate access to information and information networks has been seen in the past as contributing to the fragmentation of the Hervey Bay community and the felt isolation of its residents. Bay Connect was established to challenge these community conditions and all available research has found that the community has begun responding to that challenge.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Internet access allows for many types of participation in communication processes. Through engagement in its processes, the empowerment potential of Internet use is great. As the 1994 Community Development Workshop in Hervey Bay pointed out, such opportunities could be especially important to the community members of Hervey Bay who are marginalized culturally and socially (the unemployed and other welfare recipients). Reducing marginalisation through the provision of public access information technologies such as the Internet by organizations like Bay Connect and the University of Southern Queensland has significant implications for community identity construction and maintenance. This is the real outcome and strength of the Bay Connect experience.

When considering the present and future of networked information and communication technology however, it is certain that while the Internet seems to have many positive and democratising uses, there are also many obstacles that limit its potential. Thus, further research into the cultural, political, social and economic implications of Internet use by

marginalized groups must be undertaken to ascertain if the Internet's potential is being realized. A second step would be to analyse what groups or interests are using which technologies for what purpose.

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